DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 664 FL 015 510

AUTHOR Prabhu, N. S.
TITLE Communicative Teaching: "Communicative" in What Sense?
PUB DATE 85
NOTE 10p.; In: Communicative Language Teaching. Selected Papers from the RELC Seminar (Singapore, April 23-27, 1984). Anthology Series 14 (FL 015 507).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Classroom Techniques; *Communicative Competence (Languages); Comparative Analysis; *Definitions; Educational Strategies; *Notional Functional Syllabi; Second Language Instruction; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

In recent years a variety of conceptions of the meaning of "communicative" in language teaching materials has arisen. One study defines a communicative exercise as one that has a student use a form rather than merely practice it. Another, applicable only to intermediate or advanced level students, asserts that natural language use involves an ability beyond the deployment of an internalized language system and that this ability can also be analyzed as a system and developed delibarately in learners. A third conception underlies notional syllabuses and involves three related claims: that meaning allows the statement of language teaching syllabuses in semantic rather than structural terms; that such a syllabus should have a beneficial effect on classroom activity by making it more meaning-focused; and that such a syllabus statement allows more pragmatic selection and organization of teaching items. A fourth conception is that communicative teaching is a matter of basing course construction on needs analysis. A fifth is that communicative teaching consists of meaning-focused activity in the classroom, unrestrained by any preselection or prediction of language. Understanding that a number of conceptions are in use can assist in making classroom experience lead to language use outside the classroom. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Makhan L. Tickoo

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED266664

FL015510

Communicative Teaching: "Communicative" in what Sense?

N.S. PRABHU

This paper is an attempt to identify and discuss the different senses in which the term "communicative" has been used in recent proposals and materials for language teaching. The analysis is conceptual, not historical.

The first concept I want to discuss is that communicative teaching consists of adding a new component to existing pedagogic procedures and perhaps also a redistribution of emphases in those procedures. Specifically, the practice stage of a lesson or teaching unit based on a pre-selected linguistic input (e.g., a structural item) should, it is thought, not rely any more on drill-like exercises or sets of parallel but semantically unrelated contexts but should employ, instead, communicative exercises. A communicative exercise is defined, for this purpose, either loosely in terms of larger contexts, texts instead of sentences, games, simulations and roleplay, or more precisely, as in Johnson (1982: 163–75) in terms of an information-gap, information-transfer, task-dependency etc. What is considered important is that the learner is engaged in a meaning-focused activity and handles the language-form he has been taught a little earlier with a purpose other than merely the handling of it. The learner, that is to say, is now using the form, not merely practising it.

When teachers or educational administrators say that they wish to incorporate communicative teaching within the existing framework of a structural syllabus — and when specialists claim that a communicative methodology can in fact be reconciled with a linguistic syllabus — this is the sense in which they must be using the term "communicative", viz. the addition of a component of communicative exercises to the practice stage of each teaching unit. The reconciliation involved is essentially that between a pre-selected language item which is deliberately being taught and some meaning-focused activity which brings that item into use. One can therefore

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

ask two questions: What is the possible value of such a reconciliation? What is likely to be its pedagogic cost?

The value of introducing communicative exercises in the teaching of a structural syllabus would presumably be that such meaning-focused activity can mitigate the unwanted effects of a structural syllabus. There has always been a tension in the structural approach between the principle of systematicity and the principle of naturalness: it is thought that a deliberate regulation of linguistic inputs to the learner — both in terms of an overall order and in terms of concentration on one language item at a time — will facilitate the learner's construction of a grammar of the language for himself; and it is, at the same time, realised that natural language use is an activity in which the user's internal grammar is being deployed without any deliberation. A linguistic regulation of inputs leads to pedagogic activities which involve linguistic deliberation in classroom transactions and therefore runs the risk of promoting an ability which does not approximate to natural language use. The problem then is: how can one make a deliberate linguistic input in such a way that becomes available for non-deliberate deployment by the learner? How, that is to say, can one ensure that something that is learnt through form-focused activity is deployable in meaning-focused use? One answer which suggests itself readily is that meaning focused activity should be employed within the classroom as a supplement — indeed, a corrective — to form-focused activity; and a communicative exercise at the end of each teaching unit is meant to serve this function. The model of language acquisition which operated in such thinking is one of deliberate language inputs being first received and handled deliberately by the learner and then being made to sink below the level of linguistic consciousness. The value of communicative exercises, then, is that, by focusing the learner's attention on things other than language, they create conditions in which the learner engages in a non-deliberate use of the language input received earlier.

Against this perceived advantage, we should consider the pedagogic cost of attempting to reconcile a structural syllabus with a communicative methodology. A structural syllabus by its nature demands that classroom activity be designed to bring into play a pre-selected language item and, if communicative exercises are to be employed in the process, those exercises too will have to meet that demand. Natural language-use, however, does not in general allow

prediction of particular language and any genuine meaning-focused activity in the classroom cannot, consequently, be expected to bring into play a pre-selected language item. Indeed, this is an essential part of the distinction we make between form-focused and meaning-focused activities: the more dependable the prediction of particular language, the more form-focused the activity is and vice-versa. Language drills are activities in which the language aimed at is most predictable and contextualisation is a process which proportionately reduces that predictability. A communicative exercise — that is to say, a meaning-focused activity — is therefore one in which particular language is least predictable and yet adherence to a structural syllabus requires that particular language be predicted in it. This is a very real conflict and its practical consequences in the classroom can be either the use of activities which are communicative only in appearance (but fulfil linguistic prediction) or the use of activities which are genuinely meaning-focused (but do not conform to the linguistic syllabus). The former is what one sees in a large majority of the so-called communicative exercises (including games, role-play etc.) suggested or provided in the literature; and the latter is what is involved in Brumfit's straightforward proposal to provide time in the classroom for fluency activity, quite independently of language-focused accuracy activity — that is to say, a disassociation of the communicative activity from the structural syllabus (Brumfit 1981) not an integration of the two. There is a further point to make about predicting particular language in meaning-focused activities. When one has made a preselection of language there is an inevitable attempt to ensure its occurrence in the activity being set-up and an accompanying uncertainty (hence, anxiety) about it in conducting the activity. This leads to an effort to monitor and scan the language that is being brought into play even while it is being brought into play — an effort to combine deliberation with non-deliberate deployment. This is a process which is very unlike language-use and is sure to produce a distortion, in varying degrees, of the discourse that emerges from the activity. The issue therefore is not only that particular language is largely unpredictable for genuinely meaning-focused activity; it is also that, even when it is predictable to some extent, the act of making the prediction has consequences which are detrimental to the quality of meaning-focused activity.

Let me now move to a second concept of what communicative

BEST COPY AVAILAB

teaching is. This is based on the familiar distinction between grammatical and communicative competence — or between "usage" and "use". It is asserted that natural language use involves an ability which goes beyond the deployment of an internalized language-system and that this additional ability can also be analysed as a system and developed deliberately in learners. The analyses attempted are both in terms of rhetorical functions which make discourse coherent and in terms of interactional functions which make inter-personal communication possible. The claim is that these functions tend to occur in identifiable patterns and that the ability to operate these patterns can and should be developed in language-learners. What is involved here therefore is not a claim about the acquisition of language-structure but the claim that it is not enough to acquire language-structure. Consequently, this notion of communicative teaching is relevant only to intermediate — or advanced — level courses, not to initial language teaching. It has accordingly been used mainly on what are called language-activation, extension or acculturation courses, which aim to teach people how to use the language they already know. In practice, of course, such courses very often attempt to teach some elements of language-structure as well — or to remedy certain gaps in the earlier acquisition of language-structure — and that leads to a conflict between deliberate linguistic inputs and a message-focused operation of discourse patterns (or to a disassociation of the two kinds of activity), in the same way as has been discussed above. It is also possible to make a much larger claim for this particular concept of communicative teaching, viz. that message-focused activity, which develops the ability to operate discourse patterns, is at the same time a good way of bringing about the acquisition of language-structure itself. This would be a radical development of the concept we are dealing with and is in fact close to a different concept which I will discuss later in this paper.

A third concept of what makes language-teaching communicative is that which underlies notional syllabuses. It involves three related claims: first, that the world of meaning can be analysed sufficiently for us to state language-teaching syllabuses in semantic, instead of structural, terms; second, that a syllabus-statement in semantic terms is likely to have a beneficial effect on classroom activity, by making it more meaning-focused; and third, that such a syllabus-statement permits a more purposeful or pragmatic selection

and organisation of teaching items than does a structural syllabus (Wilkins 1981). The first claim is obviously vulnerable if taken on its own but what it refers to is not the world of meaning as such but the sorts of meaning units which are identifiable in recurrent situations of language-use and which can, more importantly, be associated with the items of language structure that are normally employed to articulate them. It is this association of semantic and structural items that sustains the second claim, viz. that the resulting classroom activity is then likely to be more meaning-focused. The assumption is that each structural item in the syllabus will then appear under a conspicuous semantic label which will act as a constant reminder that the item is to be handled meaningfully in the classroom and will also perhaps help to suggest certain actual contexts which can be employed for the purpose. The third claim — that of purposeful selection — is based on the assumption that learners can be equipped with specific language for specific situations and is related to the perceived desirability of graded objectives, modular courses and surrender values.

The first comment to make on this concept is that it is concerned with modes of making and justifying statements about language courses, not with modes of acquisition at all — of either linguistic or communicative competence. It does involve the hope that a semantic labelling and grouping of language-items will lead to greater attention to meaning in the classroom but it makes no hypotheses about what meaningfulness consists of or how such meaningfulness will promote the acquisition of language-structure. It seems to rely simply on the belief that language-items should be taught in association with their meaning and with maximal contextualisation — a belief which long pre-dates the communicative teaching movement. Notional syllabuses, that is to say, tell us very little about teaching or learning and cannot therefore claim to be communicative, in any particular sense, in terms of classroom activity.

A second comment is that notional syllabuses skirt the issue of input-systematicity. The point here is not just that the semantic analysis being used is of questionable consistency and exhaustiveness; the more important point is that such a syllabus necessarily destroys what systematicity is possible in purely structural terms. Given that the relationship between linguistic and semantic units is far from being one-to-one, any attempt to organise a syllabus seman-

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

tically must involve a sacrifice on linguistic systematicity. There are of course arguments possible (and put forward) on this issue in terms of purposeful selection and surrender value but there seem to be no pedagogic arguments at all — in terms of whether or not input-systematicity facilitates acquisition. If linguistic systematicity is a help in language-acquisition, then notional syllabuses make a large sacrifice on that front; and if such systematicity is claimed not to be of value for language-acquisition, surely that claim needs to be argued in terms of an acquisition-model?

A third and final comment on this is that notional syllabuses are not just syllabuses in semantic terms; they are bi-dimensional syllabuses in which each unit has a semantic label and one or more associated linguistic items. Now, syllabus-specification has an important impact on what language data are made available to the learner at each stage: the data at any given point are those defined and delimited by the item of the syllabus being taught. This delimitation of data — either in the materials or in the classroom — can be looked on as an aid to learning but it can also reach a point which makes it deprivation. The delimitation demanded by a bi-dimensional syllabus is clearly much greater than that required by a unidimensional syllabus (in whatever terms). Further, notional syllabuses seem, in practice, to have set the trend for greater elaboration in syllabus-statements by the addition of further dimensions. Syllabuses have, for instance, been constructed which specify, at each unit, a notion or function, one or more structures, a situation or a task etc. Each of these multiple dimensions has the effect of imposing a restriction on what can go into a teaching unit — and the combined effect of several dimensions must reach the point of impoverishing the actual input to the learner, causing deprivation.

A fourth concept of communicative teaching is that it is a matter of basing course-construction on needs analyses. The claims involved are, first, that there are material differences between the language (or discourse) typical of one situation and that typical of another; and, second, that it is desirable to equip learners directly with the particular language or discourse features which are typical of the target situations. The specification of typical features can be in structural, sociolinguistic, semantic or discoursal terms — or a complex combination of all these, as in Munby (1978) — and most effort on this approach seems in fact to have been confined to arriving at

such specifications. The second claim — about the desirability of equipping learners directly with the relevant items of language or features of discourse — has hardly been argued in pedagogic terms, as pointed out forcefully by Widdowson (1984). And yet there are crucial issues here for a model of language acquisition — issues involving the notion of equipping learners as against enabling them, the notion of "system" as an analyst's construct as against that of "system" as an operational ability, and the difference in kind between the rules of language and the rules of use. A specification of learner's communicative needs does not make the classroom teaching communicative in any particular sense — and may in fact tend to make it less communicative by putting a premium on equipping activities at the expense of enabling ones.

The fifth and final concept I want to discuss is that communicative teaching consists of meaning-focused activity in the classroom, unrestrained by any preselection or prediction of language. Two claims are being made: first, that meaning-focused activity, involving what I have referred to as non-deliberate deployment, is the best condition for the acquisition of language structure; and, second, that a linguistic syllabus, involving a planned progression in structural terms and a pre-selection of language items for particular activities, will undermine the quality and value of such meaning-focused activity. The stand taken on input-systematicity is that it is unhelpful to acquisition since "system" as an analyst's construct cannot be taken to be isomorphic with the system hypothesised to lie behind an ability to operate in language; and, moreover, the order of inputs is unlikely to correspond to a process of acquisition through interlanguage development. It is also thought that form-focused activity will promote a kind of knowledge which does not represent acquisition and that an ability to deploy language non-deliberately can only be acquired through experience of non-deliberate deployment. Whatever delimitation of input is demanded by this process is brought about, it is claimed, automatically by the pedagogic procedure — of selecting and conducting appropriate meaning-focused activities and of a natural simplification of language to facilitate comprehension, similar to what has been called "caretaker talk".

This concept is thus concerned directly with methodology and is based on a model of what may be called acquisition through deployment, in contrast to a model of regulated input-assimilation.

A sustained attempt to develop and try-out classroom activities in conformity with this concept has been made in the form of a teaching experiment in southern India in the past five years, as reported in a paper I gave at this seminar last year (Prabhu 1985).

I have pointed out five different senses in which the term "communicative" has been used in the profession. They may not all be mutually exclusive in practice (and there are those who look on eclecticism as an absolute virtue) but I think it is important to be aware, in discussion, of which sense one is using the term in and what its implications are for one or another aspect of language pedagogy. This is especially necessary at a time, as now, when "communicative" has become very much a laudatory term. I now wish to conclude this paper with a general observation on the five concepts.

A central problem in language-teaching is: how can we ensure that the language experience provided in the classroom leads to an ability for language use outside the classroom? Different answers are possible to this question, depending on different perceptions of the difference between classroom phenomena and real-life phenomena; and I think the different senses of the term "communicative" can all be related to such different perceptions. Thus, if one saw the difference in terms of form-focused and meaning-focused activity but did not consider the two to be irreconcilable, one would seek to supplement form-focused work with communicative exercises. If, alternatively, one saw the difference in terms of rules of language and rules of use, one would propose post-initial teaching which can extend or convert usage into use. If, instead, one saw the difference mainly in terms of motivation and learners' perception of relevance, one might propose syllabus-statements which permit a modular organisation and surrender values or are conspicuously based on needs-analyses. Finally, if one saw the difference in terms of form-focused and meaning-focused activity and considered the two to be irreconcilable, one would propose teaching which is based entirely on meaning-focused activity. It will be seen from this that the first and the last concepts in my list are closely related — and perhaps throw up the most crucial issues.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

REFERENCES

Brumfit, C.J. "The Limits of the Language Syllabus" in John A.S. Read (ed.), *Trends in Language Syllabus Design*, SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 1984.

Johnson, Keith. *Communicative Syllabus Design and Methodology*. Pergamon, 1982.

Munby, J. *Communicative Syllabus Design*. CUP, 1978.

Prabhu, N.S. "Procedural Syllabuses" in John A.S. Read (ed.), *Trends in Language Syllabus Design*. SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, 1984.

Widdowson, H.G. *Learning Purpose and Language Use*. CUP, 1984.

Wilkins, D.A. "Notional Syllabuses Revisited" and "Notional Syllabuses Revisited: A Further Reply", *Applied Linguistics* Vol.II, No.1, 1981

BEST COPY AVAILABLE